

## **FOCUS ON THE FUTURE: JEWISH EDUCATION UNBOUND**

**by Deborah Nagler**

When Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, the clarion call of the *shofar* brought down its walls. For Joshua, this was a pivotal conquest in his campaign to establish a Jewish homeland in Canaan. In like fashion, the future of Jewish education will depend upon our ability to bring down the walls or boundaries that have defined its institutions, classrooms, and curricula in the twentieth century. Against the backdrop of globalism, technological development, social change, and economic instability, only a plastic and easily permeable system will give us the tools to engage and educate the twenty-first century Jewish learner.

On an institutional level, this means that schooling will not necessarily take place only in schools. Online learning will continue to filter down into Jewish high schools and elementary schools, as it has in the public school sector. Hybrid formats, combining computer-based learning with face-to-face classrooms, will become more common. Informal or experiential education increasingly will combine with formal education, bringing the motivational and immersive strengths of camping to year-round programs. Further, creative partnerships between institutions will allow for the sharing of resources in what is likely to be an environment of ongoing fiscal challenge. Because technology has removed geographic barriers, partnering institutions will be found anywhere in the country and in the world.

The role of the teacher will have changed in this new system. Rather than being a lecturer or instructor, the teacher will be a facilitator of learning, guiding the student in a self-defined journey of learning. In addition, the boundary between teacher and student will be less pronounced, as students use emerging technologies to explore the vast knowledge pool of the Web. Teachers will find that they can learn from their students, as well as teach them.

In the twenty-first century, the family again will have a pivotal role in Jewish education. Formal learning will be enhanced by multi-generational participation. Students will benefit from sharing the learning process with older siblings, parents, and even grandparents. More than that, the role of parents will be an active one. They will need to step in to guide or at least monitor the computer-based learning that will take place in the home.

In this evolving scenario, curricula also will have fluid boundaries. The “just-in-case” approach to teaching, featuring information or skills that may or may not be useful in the future, will give way to learning that is personalized and interest-driven. In the case of Hebrew education, for example, all students may continue to learn to decode Hebrew, but some may choose to learn conversational Hebrew, while others elect a path that explores Hebrew text.

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Rather than today's one-size-fits-all approach, the emerging Jewish classroom will help students cultivate a personal learning environment (PLE) composed of classmates and teachers both near and distant. In such a PLE, learning does not stop at the door of the school. The student can continue to investigate and study after school hours by using electronic media and may continue to develop and deepen learning over the course of many years. Additionally, the student will be able to cultivate a network of experts, resources, and fellow learners that will be the foundation for lifelong learning and social connections.

Along these lines, *Bar/Bat Mitzvah* will no longer be perceived as an end goal or boundary. Instead, it will be redefined as a step in the process of "leveling up" to higher and higher levels of Jewish expertise and knowledge. The motivation to continue in this process will come from recognition by the community or peers. A contributing factor will be the development of the sense that the learner is participating in the epic, timeless adventure that is *Klal Yisrael*.

Until now, textbooks also have presented pre-set boundaries for knowledge. The information presented is limited to the facts on the page. Already, such textbooks are largely obsolete. Technological advances in both hardware and software have enabled unprecedented access to information and have spawned a myriad of pathways to knowledge. Twenty-first century Jewish education will use the Web as a supplement to or a replacement for texts, thereby offering learners up-to-date information in multi-media formats.

Interactive, online platforms also will transform the learning experience. By using 3D immersive tools, like that of Second Life or gaming platforms, Jewish education will do more than simply relate the facts or tell the story of Jewish life. Students will cross the boundary from the real to the virtual world in order to "participate" in recreated chapters of Jewish history. Through role-play and simulations, they will explore history, investigate the artifacts of the time period, and extrapolate the lessons for contemporary Judaism.

Sacred texts always have been a critical part of Jewish life and education. Mobile devices now make them available anytime, anywhere. Further, the process of learning and understanding such texts is even more strongly supported by the presence of online experts and resources. This does not downplay the value of face-to-face learning, but rather underscores that Jewish education has now entered an era where learning is not bound by geography, access to text, availability of a teacher, or the skill of the learner.

Much of the institutional, curricular, and programmatic change that has been described above has already begun to happen, although this alone is not enough to ensure the future of Jewish education and Jewish life. Many different kinds of "walls" make learners feel unwelcome in the Jewish community and discourage participation in Jewish education. Whether we raze these walls, or simply lift them on all sides as Abraham did in his tent, we need to create a future that is truly welcoming and encouraging for Jewish learners.

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The Jewish educational establishment is beginning to understand that significant change must take place if we are going to serve future generations. Most importantly, we need to develop educational systems that are not bound by the assumptions or expectations of the last century. Cultivating fluid boundaries in our educational landscape is a great start.

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